



Fast Food Epidemic and its effects on health

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The wide spread consumption of Fast Food in the world today is a cause for grave concern. What exactly do we mean by Fast Food? Fast food is one that is sold ready to eat. These items are generally mass produced and available at many outlets for convenient pick up and consumption. Most of the food is pre-cooked elsewhere and transported for distribution to different parts of the city where the local outlet will generally just assemble and heat / reheat in a microwave before serving or delivering. These foods are generally cooked or fried in Palmolein and contain preservatives to prevent the food from spoiling. Palmolein is liquid palm oil and has a high smoking point which gives it an oxidative stability that enhances the shelf life. But it also has a high level of saturated fat which has been found to increase the LDL cholesterol. High levels of LDL in the body are a known risk factor for heart disease and strokes.

Fast foods are high in calories with little or no nutritive value. They contain high quantities of starch, salt, sugar and fat. Burgers, pizzas, pasta, noodles, French fries, milk shakes, desserts like pastries and cakes and fizzy drinks all belong to the same category as they contain a high dose of sugar and generally, and no fresh ingredients.

Many of the ready-to-eat snacks are sold in sealed packs of different sizes. The packaging materials often contain plastic and some reinforced paper. Some disposable food packaging materials can be bad for health, primarily due to the leaching of chemicals and micro plastics into the food, especially if the food is heated in these containers in the microwave

How do these ingredients, used in the preparation of fast foods affect the health?

The high fat content of these ready to eat foods, increases the calorie intake of the individual and if consumed on a regular basis while maintaining the same life style, then they will cause a gradual increase in weight and eventually lead to obesity. The increased fat intake will also cause an increase in the blood Cholesterol value. Obesity and increased Cholesterol levels in blood pose a risk to the Heart and Cardiovascular system in general. They are both known to increase the chances of Heart attacks by creating blockages in the blood vessels. If a blood vessel supplying the brain is clogged, then it will lead to a stroke. The high salt content in fast foods is due not just to the presence of table salt but also the preservatives used which are Sodium Salts. Over a period of time, the high sodium levels lead to an increase in Blood Pressure. The raised blood pressure further stresses the heart causing it to pump blood with increased vigour. The high levels of sugar in readymade desserts increase the demand for insulin which the body may not always be able to meet.

While it is alright to eat such food once in a while, a regular habit of consumption of such foods, over a period of time is known to increase the incidence of Obesity, Type 2 Diabetes, Hypertension and Heart Disease. Since the sale of fast food is dependent on its attractive presentation and ease of availability all efforts are made to add artificial colours and flavours to attract customers. When children consume fast foods on a regular basis the damage to their bodies is far greater. Diabetes, Obesity High Blood Pressure and Heart Disease were considered to be diseases of adulthood. But now, with the introduction of fast foods in the diet on a frequent basis, these disorders are getting manifest at much younger ages and permanently damaging the liver, and other organs.



The presence of preservatives, chemicals in the artificial colours and flavours also harm the stomach and the digestive tract causing problems like hyperacidity, reflux, bloating and sluggish digestion. The intake of unhealthy quality and quantity of fat present in fast foods, damages the liver causing disorders like fatty liver disease. The liver is a vital organ that is responsible for a variety of functions which include the utilization and storage of the products of digestion which are required for the body to repair and rejuvenate.

The high levels of saturated fats, sodium and refined sugars in fast foods severely damages brain health and studies have shown that this may cause impairment of memory and cognitive functions of the brain, inflammation and even increased risk of stroke. This happens due to these dietary components in the fast food which damage blood vessels, reducing oxygen supply to the brain and inducing structural changes that impair the memory related neurons.

The high saturated fat and sodium content of these fast foods also reduce the Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor which is needed for learning and memory. Therefore frequent fast food indulgence will eventually cause the learning power and memory to go down. This will result in lower grades during tests in students. Since fast foods cause a spike in dopamine levels and produce a sense of mood elevation, they can become gradually addictive, giving satisfaction only when frequently consumed. These foods also cause mood changes and cravings and can increase the risk of strokes as documented by studies. Brain fog can occur, clouding both memory and judgement. Parents must enlighten their children about these ill effects of fast foods so as to prevent their downhill journey towards ill health.

Does this mean that burgers, pizzas, pasta, noodles, milk shakes, pastries and cakes are all bad for health and should not be consumed? No, the items per se are not bad in small quantities. It is the ingredients used in mass production commercially, that make these foods unhealthy. The very same foods can be made at home from scratch using fresh ingredients and healthier options of fat like groundnut oil, sesame oil or fresh butter. It is essential to wash thoroughly all fruits and vegetables, whole pulses and other grains before cooking in the conventional age-old traditional manner. Artificial colouring and flavouring agents should be avoided. Food can be flavoured with fresh herbs like coriander, mint, and curry leaves. Dried ingredients like jeera and asafoetida too add flavour to many of our Indian dishes.

A healthy diet will go a long way in keeping us fit.